

## That They May Be One

If you haven't heard me talk about the grand 101-year old tradition of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity or don't remember what you may have heard, it's worth rehearsing the facts. An Episcopalian priest named Fr. Paul Wattson was a great believer in ecumenical unity in general and reunification of Catholics and Anglicans in particular. He founded the Society of the Atonement to promote those goals in 1898 at Graymoor in Garrison, NY. From January 18-25, 1908, the community at Graymoor celebrated the first Church Unity Octave, the original name for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and one which is actually more appropriate as the event lasts eight days, not seven. The observation spread slowly until ecumenical relations were given a boost by the Second Vatican Council from 1962 – 1965. In 1968, the World Council of Churches and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity began collaborating each year to choose scriptures and themes and to promote the Week of Prayer worldwide.

Groups of churches from nations around the world submit scriptural themes each year to the WCC and this year the submission of churches from Korea was selected. Their selection of our passage from Ezekiel seems natural as they are well-acquainted with the circumstance of living in a divided nation. Since the Allied partition of the peninsula following World War II, Koreans living on either side of the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel have been mostly unable to visit or even to communicate with family and friends on the other side. Just as the Jews of the Babylonian Exile were unable to worship at their destroyed Temple, so the citizens of North Korea are unable to follow the dictates of their own religious conscience. Faced with these appalling restrictions on their liberty, Christians of all stripes in Korea (Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox) are finding common cause with their Buddhist, Confucian and Taoist neighbors to stand for peace and liberty for the whole peninsula and to pray and work for the reunification of their nation.

As we are reminded by the study and promotional materials coming from the World Council of Churches for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, “such situations of confrontation, antagonism, conflict, violence, and war rooted in religious, racial, and ethnic hostilities are not limited to the Korean peninsula, but occur in many places in the world today.” As we consider these words from the prophet Ezekiel today, we should also consider how they reflect our own national history and current situation as well as the continuing division of Christians around the world. Just like the Jews in the time of Ezekiel, we live in a milieu that often focuses on tribal divisions among us. Like those people of God, we are faced with the task of finding healing for those breaches and we, too, look for the leadership of one who can restore unity.

A few thoughts, then, on the context of Ezekiel's message; for, as I'm sure you all know by now, I believe that the more we know about the context of our Scriptures, the more readily we can ascertain their applicability to our own situation. The prophecies which come down to us in the Book of Ezekiel indicate a ministry that lasted from approximately 594 through 571 BCE, the years of the early Babylonian Exile, leading up to and following the complete destruction of Jerusalem. Within a 150 year span, the Chosen People have seen the obliteration of their Northern Kingdom, an all-too-brief period of religious reform and political freedom under King Josiah, then a return to warfare and turmoil, leading up to the surrender of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 598 and the final rebellion and destruction of Jerusalem in 586. The citizens of the Southern Kingdom of Judah have seen the apparent end of the Davidic Monarchy as five Judean kings are killed or deposed by their Egyptian and Babylonian enemies in just over twenty years. Ezekiel, a member of the hereditary priesthood, had been taken captive into Babylon

## That They May Be One

along with the other members of Judah's elite in 598 and from there he preaches first a word of warning to those who remain in the Promised Land and, after the razing of the Temple, a word of hope and consolation to the defeated nation.

As I've mentioned before, we primarily remember the prophecies of Ezekiel for their oddness. Under the guidance of God, Ezekiel often acts out his message, participating in a variety of bizarre acts of what we might call performance art to make his point. In our passage this morning, Ezekiel is more street entertainer than cutting-edge performance artist. His trick of joining two sticks together sounds like something out of the repertoire of illusionists David Copperfield, Penn & Teller or Criss Angel. Not that I'm poo-hooing the skill needed by those entertainers, by the way. Having been inducted into the fraternity of illusionists by local master Steffan Soule, who taught me to make a live dove appear and disappear for a production at Taproot, I can assure you that it's hard work, demanding both intense concentration and physical prowess.

But Ezekiel's inspired trick of joining two sticks together is more than just a crowd-pleasing stunt. It is revelatory of at least three specific God-given messages. First, that the tribal history that has divided God's people for the past 350 years can still be their strength, as it was previously. Second, that their unity shall be restored. And third, that they shall find their unity under the leadership of a son of David, one chosen by Yahweh for the purpose.

Let's look first at how Ezekiel's stick trick evokes the tumultuous history of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. The prophet is told by God to label his two sticks, "For Judah, and the Israelites associated with it" and "For Joseph (the stick of Ephraim) and all the house of Israel associated with it." Clearly, this is a reference to the division of the Children of Israel into two kingdoms after the death of Solomon; Judah in the South and Israel in the North. The Southern Kingdom consisted of the titular tribe of Judah, the tribe of Benjamin and those members of the tribe of Levi settled among them. The Northern Kingdom was composed of the other ten tribes plus their associated Levites; eight of those tribes named for sons of Jacob or Israel. But there never was a tribe named for Joseph – instead, his inheritors received a double portion as the tribes named after his sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. And the Northern Kingdom was never called by the name of Joseph, instead being usually referred to by his father's God-given name of Israel or by the name of the Kingdom's most powerful tribe, Ephraim. In referring to the Divided Kingdoms as he does, Ezekiel is calling his listeners to remember their origins in the sons of Jacob. They are all from the same family, he seems to be saying. They should look to their shared roots for their future and not to the inter-tribal squabbles that later divided them. Dr. Gregory Mobley, professor of Old Testament at Andover Newton Theological School points out that Ezekiel is highlighting the value of both the Northern and Southern kingdoms rather than choosing one over the other. According to Mobley, Ezekiel focuses on "...how to have enough common ground to be a relationship community but enough diversity to be alive." They need each other, these survivors of the destroyed nations. They are all the inheritors of God's promises to Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel and Leah. They are all descendents of those who followed Moses out of slavery, those who pledged their lives and the lives of their children's children's children to God and to God's Law.

## That They May Be One

The “stick trick” carries another important image that may be lost to us across the centuries and the translation from Hebrew to English. The word used in this passage for stick, according to the Paulist scholar Lawrence Boadt, is also the word used for “(a) staff of office, or royal scepter.” Boadt cites Numbers 17:16-20, “when each tribe is told to make a staff for its leader with his name written on it as an emblem of its sovereignty.” Such a symbol is not completely lost to us. If you are old enough to remember the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II of England, or if you have seen the British Crown Jewels in person or in pictures, think of the piece of regalia known as the “Sceptre with Dove.” According to British tradition, it is “also known as the Rod of Equity, (and) features a dove's likeness atop a golden cross, symbolizing the Holy Ghost guiding the actions of kings and queens.” Nor are we without modern reference, at least in literature, for a shattered symbol of power, the restoration of which will herald the restoration of a broken nation. In J.R.R. Tolkien's epic, The Lord of the Rings, the brothers Boromir and Faramir of Gondor both experience the same strange dream in which they are told to “Seek for the Sword that was broken.” We learn in the course of the story that the sword in question is Narsil, the sword of Elendil, the last king of a united kingdom, shattered as he died in battle with the evil Sauron. The sword is eventually reforged as Anduril, the Flame of the West, and carried by Aragorn, the heir of Elendil, who becomes king of a newly united Arnor and Gondor, the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of Middle-Earth, when Sauron is defeated. Tolkien, a devout Catholic, was certainly not above stealing a good idea from Holy Writ.

Indeed, Tolkien's concept of a hero-king, long-awaited, who will reunite the divided kingdom and vanquish the forces of evil, seems to spring directly from this prophecy in Ezekiel and others well-known to us. Tolkien well understood the Biblical concept of how hope can keep a people alive. If you know The Lord of the Rings well, you may remember that Aragorn was known as a child by the name Estel, or “Hope.” The hope for a Son of David who would restore their nation helped the Jews to keep their identity as a people alive through the Babylonian Exile, domination by the Persians, Greeks and Romans, Diaspora and Shoah. Even today, the existence of their embattled modern state notwithstanding, Jews await the arrival of the Son of David, just as we who say He has come await His return.

Here in America, we have our own sets of mythologies built around our tribal origins and our shared history. As a loyal Son of the South, I can tell you that there is still great debate over the facts and meaning of our own war between North and South and its aftermath; the war y'all Yankees call The Civil War and my people call The War Between the States or, when we're really “het up,” The War of Northern Aggression. It hasn't escaped our notice, by the by, that the faithful remnant of the Chosen People in the Bible was to be found in the Southern Kingdom. I'm pulling your legs a bit, of course, for today, even in the South, the realization is slowly sinking in that the fall of the Confederacy was tied to the great societal sin of slavery and that the descendants of both the Blue and the Gray have a long way to go in healing the wounds and continuing evil of racism.

I raise this subject in part because on this day as we consider the subject of Christian Unity I am so aware that one of the greatest threats to our unity is that continuing spectre of division between races. It has often been said that the Sunday morning hour of worship is the most segregated hour in America. Yet as members of the Body of Christ, we are told by the Apostle Paul that “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer

## That They May Be One

male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” That is why Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose life we celebrate tomorrow, called ceaselessly for the furtherance of the Beloved Community, where little children would be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character, where the children of former slaves and the children of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of the family of God, where freedom would ring from every mountainside, every hill and every molehill.

That is why I celebrate with you today that our little church is part of American Baptist Churches, USA, where no ethnic or racial group can claim a majority, the only such denomination in America. That is why I celebrate with you today that, more specifically, we are members of the Evergreen Association of American Baptist Churches, where our commitment to equality among ethnic groups has led us to a new and (for Baptists) even radical way of doing business. I still don't know if I can explain, in logical terms, how our process of breaking into ethnic caucuses to consider our business actually enhances our feelings of cross-cultural togetherness, other than to speculate that the balancing of the scales of power sets us free to love, but I am continually awed by fact that it works. I have seen the blatant discrimination still practiced in parts of the South and I have seen the uneasy, covert segregation of parts of the North but I have never experienced the level of racial harmony and Christian love across ethnic boundaries that I have experienced in Evergreen. I can give you one example of how it works, of how the built-up goodwill and trust has led to open communication and loving action. Leaders of the Black Caucus were recently discussing the financial shortcomings of our region and how they might contribute in a significant way to Evergreen's budget. Given the ecstatic reception by all involved at the recent Evergreen Annual Meeting and the Seattle Baptist Union Annual Meeting to barbecue dinners provided by a restaurant owned by a member of one of the Black Caucus churches (and if you were at one of those meetings, you know what I mean), the Black Caucus decided to host a barbecue cook-off event to benefit Evergreen. While the event is to be open to all who wish to consume, chefs would be drawn only from the Black Caucus because, as one Black Caucus leader who shall remain nameless said, “You know White People can't barbecue.” I confess that when this word filtered back to me, I took it as a challenge. So at our recent Board meeting, I went to that leader and informed him, with great love and good humor, that he was mistaken and that I would welcome the chance to prove it. I piqued his interest further with a description, though not a recipe, for my smoked brisket and homemade barbecue sauce. After the caucuses had their separate meetings, he walked over to my table, slapped my back and said, “You're in.”

I cannot tell you how much it meant to me, a Southern White Boy, whose grandparents as a matter of course spouted some of the most dreadful racist sentiments you would care to name, that a leader of the Black Community would say to me, in essence, “we accept you. We accept you as a brother in Christ and we see the value of your contribution to our different but connected cultures.” It is the lesson of Ezekiel come to life. We Christian Americans come from different tribes that have often been at war between each other. But it is for us as it was for Ezekiel's contemporaries. Meg Hess, an American Baptist pastor from New Hampshire, writes concerning those Israelites, “God's gift of their unity is still available to them, Ezekiel insists. It is a unity that is achieved not through sacrificing their unique and valuable differences, but rather by looking to their common life as a part of the life of God.”

## That They May Be One

As it is for us in discovering our commonalities in the life of God across ethnic tribalisms, so it is for us in discovering our commonalities across denominational lines. Lawrence Boadt writes, “each Christian church must examine its own attitudes towards other Christians and acknowledge our common commitment to obedience and service of the one King over us all, seek purification of our harm and distrust toward one another, and seek common faithfulness to his Son in whose name and salvation we all believe. Many important differences of understanding still have to be worked through to achieve unity, as well as healing the distrust and reluctance born of stubborn historical divisions that seriously cloud our efforts. But we can pray all the more confidently with hope and expectation of an ultimate Christian unity when we hear Ezekiel’s prophetic vision of a God who restores oneness to an alienated, divided, and broken people, despite seemingly insurmountable obstacles.”

It is, after all, my sisters and brothers, not we alone who can achieve oneness, fellowship, κοινωνία, the Beloved Community. We can do this thing only under the leadership of “great David’s Greater Son,” our Lord, Christ Jesus. It is he, in his life, teachings, work, death and resurrection who provides us the way to come together in love across the great divides with which we have marked ourselves; across the unscientific divide of race, across the divide of history whose lessons are not accepted, across the divide of theological wrangling when all that is really required is the simple agreement that Jesus is Lord. Jesus provides the bridge across all such chasms and across the chasm between us and our Loving Creator. He did so with his own “stick trick.” Because Jesus gave himself up to his mission, because he was obedient even to death on the conjoined sticks of the cross, we have been reconciled to God and given the power of love to be unified with one another.

And it is because of Jesus and the hope that comes to us through him that the Christians in Korea close their consideration of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity with this great passage from Revelation (21:3-6): “And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with humankind, and God will dwell with them, and they shall be God’s people, and God Godself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. And the One that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said unto me, Write: for these words are true and faithful. And he said unto me, It is done. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto those that are athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely.” Thanks be to God!